

Healthy Forests Act a good step in management of wilderness

Management of the nation's public forests moved forward this week with approval by the U. S. House of Representatives of the "Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003."

It now goes to the Senate, where the office of Oregon Greg Walden, who worked hard for it in the House, said it has strong allies from the Western states.

If anyone has incentive to protect against more wildland fires, it's Walden, whose eastern Oregon-southern Oregon congressional district was ravaged by fires covering hundreds of thousands of acres in 2002.

The bill, HB 1904, would streamline the appeal process to expedite thinning of dangerously overgrown forests. Other means, such as prescribed burning, are also included.

For too many years forest management has meant drastic curtailment of logging, and immediate suppression of fires. These policies allowed the dangerous buildup of fuels, which, now can create fire storms burning at a fierce intensity.

The Biscuit Fire, which incinerated nearly 500,000 acres in southern Oregon last year, is a good example.

Add to that the buildup of dead and dying trees killed by heavy insect infestations, and the nation's public forests have become a mess.

Some past logging practices contributed to the problem, but we're much more selective about tree-cutting now than we were then.

The scare scenario brought up by opponents of Walden's bill is that the nation's public forests would become pock-marked with 1,000-acre clearcuts.

That danger, if it exists at all, is more theoretical than actual.

An analysis by The Wilderness Society says the bill doesn't allow enough time to file lawsuits, and gives the Forest Service too much latitude in designing a process for public involvement.

Unfortunately, the Society's position could lead to continued paralysis of forest management. The nation deserves better. The Senate should follow the House's lead and approve the bill.